UNITED STATES
DEPARTMENT OF THE INTERIOR
BUREAU OF LAND MANAGEMENT
SURPRISE FIELD OFFICE
FINDING OF NO SIGNIFICANT IMPACT

NE WARNER FUELS REDUCTION AND HABITAT RESTORATION PROJECT FINDING OF NO SIGNIFICANT IMPACT CA-N070-2010-0014

BACKGROUND

The Bureau of Land Management (BLM) Surprise Field Office (SFO) is proposing hazardous fuels reduction and habitat restoration treatments on 1,420 acres of public lands in the vicinity of northern Surprise Valley and Barrel Springs. There are three proposed individual treatment areas varying in size from 289 acres to 599 acres. Each of these projects is proposed to reduce hazardous fuels, treat juniper in sage steppe plant communities which are decadent or declining in vigor as a result of competition, improve hydrologic conditions, and enhance the forage base for wildlife and domestic animals.

Historically, vegetation community composition, structures and dispersion within the northern Surprise Valley and Barrel Springs areas were heavily influenced by wildfire. Historical fire patterns characterized by more frequent low to moderate intensity fires maintained juniper at low densities in most of the area, with scattered areas of dense juniper woodlands. However, fire regimes within sage-steppe ecosystems have been modified as a result of domestic livestock grazing and wildfire suppression.

As the density of juniper has increased, large portions of the sage-steppe ecosystem have been converted to predominantly juniper woodlands. This shift in vegetative communities has resulted in a loss of biodiversity on the landscape, diminished habitat values, particularly for sage steppe obligate species; and has contributed to degrade surface hydrologic conditions. Increased juniper density in sage-steppe habitats also results in a decline in ground cover and exposure of bare soils, as well as increased erosion potential and a loss of soil productivity.

Juniper is widely scattered throughout the Surprise Field Office area and the intermountain west and management issues surrounding this vegetation community usually focus on stand density and/or encroachment into adjacent habitats. Management of juniper is a complex issue for BLM. Historically, juniper existed in a continuum of seral stages throughout the landscape, dominated by two stand types. Old-growth stands typically inhabit areas of rocky, shallow soils surrounded by limited fine fuels. In these areas, fire intervals are infrequent. The second dominant stand type is the juniper savanna, which is characterized by young trees across the landscape at low densities within areas of deep soils, experiencing more frequent, mixed-severity fires. However, juniper has expanded to greater than 30 percent crown closure within many areas that would have typically supported low-density juniper woodland. In these areas, understory vegetation declines resulting in expanses of bare ground and a loss of key ecosystem components.

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Based on the analysis of potential environmental impacts contained in the attached environmental assessment, and considering the significance criteria in 40 CFR 1508.27, I have determined that the actions will not have a significant effect on the human environment other than those already analyzed in the Sage Steppe Ecosystem Restoration Strategy EIS. All environmental effects for this decision (listed below) have been discussed and disclosed in the Environmental Assessment (EA); therefore, the preparation of an Environmental Impact Statement is not required prior to implementing treatments in the project area.

CONTEXT

The North East Warner Fuels Reduction and Habitat Restoration project areas (Action Area) are located on separate parcels within a 50 mile radius of Cedarville, California within Modoc County, California and Washoe County, Nevada. Fort Bidwell is located within the Surprise Valley Watershed and is designated as an at-risk wildland-urban interface (WUI) community in Federal Register Vol. 66, No. 160, *Wildland Urban Interface Communities within the Vicinity of Federal Lands That Are at High Risk from Wildfire*. Although not designated by the Federal Register as a "community at risk," the Cowhead Communities consist of several large ranches within the Warner Lakes Watershed WUI. The project area has been rated within Fire Regime Group III (mixed severity, 35-100+ year fire frequency) and Condition Class II (moderate departure from natural fire regime and vegetative characteristics) with heavy fuel loads comprised of dense juniper and sagebrush. In 2005, the Barrel Fire burned 24,370 acres and is the largest documented fire within the Action Area. Historic fire suppression land management actions have resulted in Western juniper encroachment which has increased the risk of catastrophic wildfire in the Action Area. This project meets the criteria of an Authorized Hazardous Fuels Reduction Project as defined under Section 102 of the *Healthy Forests Restoration Act of 2003* (HFRA), because it is located on Federal land and neighbors an at-risk WUI area.

INTENSITY

1) Impacts that may be both beneficial and adverse.

The EA has considered both beneficial and adverse impacts of the proposed hazardous fuels reduction and habitat restoration project. Considering all impacts, the project will result in reduced fuel loads, improved vegetative condition and fire resiliency within the proposed Action Area. The Proposed Action would decrease fuel loads and could potentially reduce fire line intensities within the Action Area, potentially resulting in an increased ability for fire suppression resources to suppress wildfire in and around private property surrounding the project area. In addition, proposed treatment would facilitate Resource Management Plan objectives for using wildland fires to restore, maintain, and improve ecosystems. The Proposed Action would facilitate the restoration of fire as a natural ecological process, potentially resulting in the restoration of more diverse vegetative communities within the area and complementing prescribed fire and fuel reduction actions implemented within adjoining forests, refuges, and BLM field offices encompassing a vast area in northeast California and northwest Nevada. Potential adverse effects to Visual and Biological

resources resulting from implementation of the Proposed Action would be minimized through implementation of proposed mitigation measures.

2) *The degree to which the proposed action affects public health or safety.*

The Proposed Action would benefit public health and safety by decreasing fuel loads and reducing fire line intensities within the Action Area, potentially resulting in an increased ability for fire suppression resources to suppress wildfire in and around private property surrounding the project area.

Per BLM Standards for Fire and Aviation and any applicable State and or County regulations, a Prescribed Burn Plan would need to be developed, reviewed and approved by SFO Fire Management Officer, SFO Manager, NOR CAL Fire Management Officer and the BLM State Fire Management Officer before any prescribed burns occur.

3) *Unique characteristics of the geographic area such as proximity to historic or cultural resources, park lands, prime farmlands, wetlands, wild and scenic rivers, or ecologically critical areas.*

Major habitat types within the Action Area include big sagebrush, low sagebrush, timber, and antelope bitterbrush, with important inclusions such as curleaf mountain mahogany, western juniper woodland, intermittent and ephemeral drainages, riverine seasonal wetlands, and wet meadows. The project area does not contain any park lands, prime or unique farmlands, or wild and scenic rivers. No Areas of Critical Environmental Concern are included within the Action Area.

The foundations of much of western Great Basin/Northeast California prehistory and ethnology were developed in this region. As a result of Cultural Resource investigations for the Action Area, a total of 47 sites, five rock stack feature locations, and 75 isolated finds were documented. Treatment recommendations specific to individual cultural sites identified within the Action Area have been integrated into proposed treatments for each individually proposed treatment area.

4) *The degree to which the effects on the quality of the human environment are likely to be highly controversial.*

The Proposed Action would decrease fuel loads and could reduce fire line intensities within the Action Area, potentially resulting in an increased ability for fire suppression resources to suppress wildfire in and around private property surrounding the project area. In addition, proposed treatment would facilitate Resource Management Plan objectives for using wildland fires to restore, maintain, and improve ecosystems. Implementation of the Proposed Action project would result in short term effects, ultimately leading to long-term benefits to the quality of the human environment. Potential adverse effects would be avoided or minimized through implementation of proposed mitigation measures relevant to biological and visual resources. Potential effects resulting from the proposed treatments are not likely

to be highly controversial.

5) *The degree to which the possible effects on the human environment are highly uncertain or involve unique or unknown risks.*

Proposed vegetative treatments represent accepted standard management practices. Mitigation measures have been identified to address the potential for resource specific adverse effects as identified by the EA. Potential uncertainties (i.e. changes in weather during prescribed burning) would be eliminated or reduced to very low levels through development of a prescribed burn plan that will establish acceptable conditions for prescribed burning and will prescribe relevant monitoring requirements.

6) *The degree to which the action may establish a precedent for future actions with significant effects or represents a decision in principle about a future consideration.*

The actions associated with this project, and as identified in the EA do not establish a precedent for future actions with significant effects and do not represent a decision in principle about a future consideration. While monitoring data from this project might be used to determine appropriate actions in future similar type projects, those projects would be subject to environmental assessment standards and as independent decision-making processes.

7) *Whether the action is related to other actions with individually insignificant but cumulatively significant impacts.*

All resources have been evaluated for cumulative impacts in the EA and no significant impacts were identified. Other fuels reduction and vegetation treatment projects may be proposed in the region. These projects seen together with anticipated future proposed land disturbing activities in the area would not result in cumulatively significant impacts within the identified cumulative assessment area. Overall, future similar projects would improve vegetation and habitat diversity and protect watersheds from erosion and hazards from large wildfires. As standard procedure, future projects would be subject to cumulative impact analysis and review on an area-specific case-by-case basis.

8) *The degree to which the action may adversely affect districts, sites, highways, structures, or objects listed in or eligible for listing in the NRHP or may cause loss or destruction of significant scientific, cultural, or historical resources.*

Hand thinning within sites and implementation of other recommended avoidance measures outlined in the Barrel Springs Mechanical/Manual Juniper Treatment Project would reduce or mitigate potential adverse effects to historic properties found within the Action Area. For all of the ineligible cultural properties, including the isolated finds, no further archaeological work is recommended. In regards to the proposed project-related treatment activities for these ineligible sites, the targeted trees and vegetation can be removed mechanically. Treatments would be limited to mechanical treatments within the Vaughn Canyon treatment area mine site and cabin. No fire would be allowed, and the cabin would be avoided. For all those cultural properties recommended eligible or are unevaluated to the National Register,

treatments are limited to hand treatments only within these site boundaries. Eligible and unevaluated sites should be flagged for mechanical avoidance prior to fuels reduction activities. Hand thinning should be utilized within cultural sites. If new roads are required to access portions of the project area, a cultural survey should be conducted prior to any ground disturbing activities.

9) *The degree to which the action may adversely affect an endangered or threatened species or its habitat that has been determined to be critical under the ESA of 1973.*

There are no known federally-listed species present in the treatment areas. Implementation of the Proposed Action would result in short-term effects to habitat for some sage steppe obligate species. However, long-term habitat productivity for sage steppe obligate species would improve following restoration. Juniper-dependent species would experience short-term and long-term effects resulting from proposed treatments and resultant restoration activities. It is anticipated that implementation of the Standard Operating Procedures identified in Appendix D, in combination with proposed mitigation measure relevant to wildlife would minimize potential adverse effects.

10) *Whether the action threatens a violation of Federal, State, or local law or requirements imposed for the protection of the environment.*

The proposed action will not violate or threaten to violate any Federal, State, or local law or requirement imposed for the protection of the environment. The proposed and alternative actions are proposed in conformance with the *Surprise Resource Management Plan* (2008), and the *Sage Steppe Ecosystem Restoration Strategy Final Environmental Impact Statement* (2008). The proposed and alternative actions are also consistent with the Healthy Forest Restoration Act (2003) and the *Collaborative Approach for Reducing Wildland Fire Risks to Communities and the Environment, 10-Year Comprehensive Strategy* (2001), and other Federal, state, and local policies and plans to the maximum extent possible.

Allen Bollschweiler

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DN: cn=Allen Bollschweiler, o=BLM, ou=Surprise Field Office, email=abollsch@blm.gov, c=US
Date: 2011.12.08 08:42:17 -08'00'

Allen Bollschweiler
Field Manager, Surprise Field Office

12/8/11
Date